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## In Berkeley, Calif., lunch has become a learning experience

By Chad Heeter | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

**BERKELEY, CALIF.** - Chef Ann Cooper is a lunch lady with a mission. She heaves another 10-gallon pot of marinara sauce onto a worktable as she prepares lunch for more than 2,000 elementary school students at the Berkeley Unified School District Kitchen. On the menu: baked pasta primavera.

Ms. Cooper ladles the sauce over a bin of rotini noodles and mixes it all together. The noodles disintegrate in her hands, and lunch turns into, well, red mush.

"I've been looking at it all morning," Cooper says, "and I've just been in tears because ... this is what we're feeding our kids."

Though she made the sauce from scratch, the low-quality "commodity noodles" ordered through the US government's national school lunch program are a good example of what's served in schools across the country, she says.

Cooper hopes to change that. Her arrival last October as the new director of nutrition services for Berkeley's public schools coincided with the district's new School Lunch Initiative, an ambitious long-range plan to put the district's 10,000 students on a path of lifelong healthy eating habits. In California, 28 percent of schoolchildren are overweight or obese, reflecting a nationwide problem.

Berkeley's School Lunch Initiative aims to replace low-quality "heat and eat" processed foods with fresh, locally grown food. The plan also teaches kids about how food gets from seed to plate by establishing school gardens and kitchen classrooms that integrate lessons about food and cooking into the academic curriculum. Organizers hope children will not only learn about the art and science of food, but also adopt nutritious eating habits.

"Teaching kids about food is as important as math or science," Cooper says.

Berkeley is not alone in trying to encourage children to eat better. According to the US Centers for Disease Control, 16 percent, or about 9 million school-age children in the US are overweight - a figure that's tripled since 1980. The news has caused many schools to rethink lunch menus and eliminate junk food by pulling the plug on vending machines and turning away soft-drink corporations bidding for so-called "pouring rights."

The Chez Panisse Foundation, founded by restaurateur and food activist Alice Waters, has committed to raising \$4 million to jump-start Berkeley's school-lunch initiative. While the long-term cost of the plan is unknown, backers say the benefit of spending more on nutritious lunches for children now means spending less on healthcare later. "They're being educated out there by a fast-food nation," Ms. Waters says. "We have to really see the public school system as a way to teach a different set of values."

Back in the kitchen, Cooper's plan is to serve nothing but fresh meat and produce from regional farms - and preferably organic. That means cooking from scratch, rare in school districts. The marinara sauce she's made would put a smile on any Italian grandmother's face - it contains more than 100 pounds of fresh vegetables. Cooper has 32 years' experience as a chef and sits on the US Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards Board. Before she took over, the lunch staff would have simply opened cans of tomato sauce.

By revamping the lunch menu, Cooper is following the guidelines of a new California law to go into effect in 2007, which sets limits on the sugar and fat content in foods and what drinks can be sold in schools. It also places restrictions for selling candy for fund-raising purposes, which has been met with criticism.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, experts say, easy-to-eat, processed foods became the norm in a time-crunched society. Schools choose processed and packaged foods because they are convenient and save on labor costs.

But expose students to freshly prepared foods everyday, and eventually they'll choose chard over Cheetos, says Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition and public health at New York University.

"The idea was that you had to give kids what they liked, or they wouldn't eat it," Professor Nestle says. "It turns out that kids can learn to like a lot of different kinds of foods."

It's a gradual process. But what children need is repeated exposure to new kinds of foods, says Suzanne Rauzon, a researcher at the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California at Berkeley. The food also needs to be perceived as "cool."

That's where the Edible Schoolyard program, part of the district's school-lunch initiative, comes in. At the Martin Luther King Middle School in the Berkeley district, students chop, cook, and set the table.

"We're just making a little dish of potatoes, garlic, lemon, and cilantro," says Michael Gould, a sixth-grader busily chopping a blue potato.

As part of an ancient history lesson, Michael and his peers are re-creating a Lebanese dish first made thousands of years ago. The ingredients came from the school's own garden - planted and harvested by students.

For 10 years, the garden and kitchen at King has been a lab for creating a culinary curriculum, where students combine food with writing, theater, science, and math. Lessons in math and science might include measuring ingredients and observing how plants grow. An English class might write about their earliest food memory.

Students learn that "what they're growing is going to be what they're cooking in the kitchen," says Esther Cook, a teacher and chef with the Edible Schoolyard. They try new, nutritious foods, and often ask for seconds, she says. Most of the district's elementary and middle schools now have gardens, and more will add kitchens next year.

The kitchen is a flurry of activity as students finish cooking and setting the table. The real magic, says Ms. Cook, is the conversation around the table once they sit down.

She poses a question: "What are you thankful for?" The students answer: "family and friends," "the garden," and "good food."

In class evaluations, Cook asks students what they do here that they don't do at home, but wish they did. The No. 1 answer: "Cook together, and eat together."

Waters says students are thirsty for the sit-down meal experience. "They're not learning how to pass the peas anymore," she says.

Meanwhile, in the cafeteria, Cooper's changes to the lunch menu have gotten a mixed response from students.

The most popular lunch used to be chips with nacho cheese. "I took away their nacho cheese sauce," she says, "and they were pretty bummed about that."

There were other changes, too: No more chocolate milk, no more sweets with high-fructose corn syrup, and no more candy sales (pencils were sold instead).

After the cheese was removed, hot lunch sales at King Middle School dropped by nearly 50 percent, say school officials. But they expect numbers to rebound after a period of transition. Cooper has introduced replacements for nachos, including fresh burritos, tamales, and enchiladas. Students also get a piece of fresh fruit or a serving of vegetables on their plate every day.

Response at Berkeley High School has been more promising. Cooper set up an organic salad bar there that's tossed-to-order. It's one of the busiest food stations in the cafeteria, and sales of salads have increased tenfold. Before the salad bar, students would get a plate of croutons, pour dressing on it, and call it "salad."

How do cash-strapped districts afford these kinds of changes?

"You can bring in healthier food at the same price as junk food," Nestle says. "Often cheaper."

When food is bought locally and made from scratch, labor costs may rise, but schools save on packaging, processor fees, and shipping costs. It may also mean fewer, but healthier, choices on the menu. The price to students stays the same.

For Cooper, the nation can't afford not to make these changes. "We need to make feeding our children a priority; we need to make teaching them about food a priority," she says. "We have to understand that it's the most important thing we can do."

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